



Cruising With Team Campos

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, April 20, 2009

Although I was born and raised in San Jose, my visits to the East Side were not commonplace. As a kid, I was advised of general safety issues about the East Side and was warned not to go “there” at night. My father taught English to adult immigrants on the East Side for about half his teaching career, and I used to accompany him when my school was closed. I would sit in the back and meet his students from all over the world. In high school I would go to East Side high school sporting events, remembering that I needed to be careful—at least that is what I was told.

Recently, in an attempt to become better acquainted with East San Jose, I elicited the help of “Team Campos”—Councilmember Nora Campos and her brother, Planning Commissioner Xavier Campos, who both grew up on the East Side. I toured District 5 with each of them separately to get the female and male perspective.

Historically, the East Side was more diverse then it is today. At one time, it had a large African American population near the beautiful new Mayfair Community Center. One of the largest African American churches in San Jose is a few blocks away from the center. A significant portion of Caucasian population left during the mid-’70s, so now, District 5 is majority Latino. It is with the Latino struggle that we have the history of Cesar Chavez organizing in East San Jose. I was shown a building behind Our Lady of Guadalupe church where Caesar held meetings. At that time it was adjacent to the old Mayfair packing plant.

East Side has many county pockets that are in the process of being annexed to the city of San Jose. Therefore, miles of sidewalks will be installed over the next decade. Overall, the neighborhoods are dense with people, and it appears as though more people live in each house than in other neighborhoods. As a result, there is very limited street parking. There are many converted garages. Code enforcement is a full-time job, and the housing recession and foreclosures have added stress to the existing neighborhoods.

Various neighborhoods developed at different times on the East Side, like the Tropicana tract of the late '50s, with nearly flat roofs, or later the Plata Arroyo tract, formerly a drive-in movie theater. Many houses have cyclone fences that divide the yard from the sidewalk which, in my opinion, gives a confined feeling. Graffiti is definitely prevalent and it seems to me like a person could work 24/7 cleaning or painting out graffiti on the East Side. It is said that if graffiti stays up people die, because much of the tagging is gang-related, marking territory, which leads to higher chance of conflict. Dealing with the gang culture will continue to be a need. By the way, I recommend the new movie at the Camera Theaters, called "Sin Nombre," which depicts gang culture and youth recruitment.

Good things are happening on the East Side, such as an increase in retail development occupied by mostly small business owners. And the Tropicana shopping center transformation with three new banks is a significant change. Form-based zoning is being planned for Alum Rock Avenue to prepare this area for development, and eventually help it become more of a destination. There are already many good restaurants on the East Side, like Texas Smokehouse on Story Road and El Pirrin on San Antonio—yummy.

Challenges will remain with adding more public transportation to this area since it has the highest ridership in the County. Also, making trails a reality, like the Silver Creek Trail that connects Lake Cunningham and the Coyote Creek. This trail may take decades, but it's worth the wait, much like trails everywhere in San Jose.

Quoting Javier, "the East Side is better then it was 20 years ago." It has its challenges no doubt as do other parts of our city. However, it is abundantly clear to me that building out Coyote Valley would have left the East Side further behind.

Xavier Campos as you may know will be running for city council in District 5 in 2010. He has deep roots in the East Side, knows the challenges of the past, present and has a vision of better East Side.

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